MARY
December 5, 2004

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Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19
Luke 1:26–42

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” . . .
“Blessed are you among women.”
Luke 1:28, 42 (NRSV)

Theologians through the centuries have been scandalized
when they contemplate that the God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent is
incarnate in one person, with that person’s particularities and limitations.
This “scandal of particularity” . . . is nowhere
more evident than in God’s selection of Mary.
God did not elect to be born of some woman but of a particular woman. . . .
A particular woman gave of her humanity to the being of the God-human.
This peasant woman nurtured, raised, trained, even shaped
the personality of the One who is God.

Cynthia L. Rigby, “Mary and the Artistry of God”
Blessed One: Protestants Perspectives on Mary

As the angel startled a young woman years ago
with unlikely, surprising news,
so, dear God, startle us again, on this Advent Sunday,
with your truth and your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sometime this afternoon, on a National Football League field, with time on the clock almost gone and only seconds left, on a team with the ball seventy yards from the goal line and desperately needing a touchdown to win, when all else has failed and hope is fading fast, the quarterback will drop back and throw the ball as far as he can and hope that a miracle will happen, that somehow, someway, one of his teammates will catch it and victory will be snatched dramatically and definitively from the jaws of defeat. Everyone knows that it is called a “Hail Mary” pass.

In the news a month or so ago was a human-interest story about a woman who saw the face of the virgin Mary on a grilled-cheese sandwich, put the sandwich in a plastic box with cotton balls for safekeeping for ten years, and now was offering to sell it on eBay. I learned last week that the

sandwich—after 1.6 million hits on eBay—was purchased by an online casino, Golden Palace.com, for $28,000. The check was delivered to the sandwich's owner—and creator, I assume—Diana Duyser of Hollywood, Florida.

Desperation football plays, grilled-cheese sandwiches, an apparition on a basement wall weeping real tears, a statuette standing sentinel on thousands of dashboards—Mary is the most recognizable woman in human history. She is also arguably the most revered, the subject of some of the most sublime art the human imagination has ever created. It is difficult to imagine Western art without her. The Italian Renaissance was almost obsessed with her. My favorite, a print of which I keep close at hand, is Fra Angelico's "The Annunciation," that moment described in the text this morning when the angel comes down to a young Jewish girl and says, "Hail Mary. The Lord is with you." And Mary, startled, afraid, says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." The original is a fresco painted on the wall of the monastery of San Marco in Florence, at the head of a stairway. The colors are delicate pastels. The angel and Mary sit across from each other and are leaning slightly, the angel toward Mary and Mary drawing back gently. It is a wonderfully mysterious moment when heaven and earth momentarily meet and God chooses an ordinary young girl to be the instrument of God's mercy and love and grace, a moment for which words and concepts and intellectual propositions are hopelessly inadequate and for which art and music come much closer to understanding and describing.

Last Monday, visiting the Glasgow Cathedral, in particular St. Mungo's Museum, which owns, among its treasures, Salvador Dali's striking masterpiece of the crucifixion, we saw Mary in several classical Renaissance paintings. What caught my eye was a delicate sculpture, from Belgium, fifteenth-century, small—maybe twelve inches high, Mary, her features simple and beautiful, eyes cast down, holds the child Jesus on her arm. He looks about eighteen months old, chubby cheeks, full of life and energy and hope as all eighteen month olds are. He's holding in his hands a big bowl of bright red strawberries; he is about to pop one in his mouth. It is a stunning affirmation of God's goodness and Mary's faithfulness, the beautiful humanness of our faith, and the radical love of Jesus Christ for this world—red strawberries and all.

She is the most revered woman in the world and the most recognizable. She speaks to people regardless of their religious faith or lack of it. Diana Doyser, who sold the sandwich with Mary's image on it and whose husband suffers from emphysema, said, "I'll miss her. . . . She was comfort to me in times when it wasn't so easy." Mary resonates deeply in the human soul. Kathleen Norris tells about receiving from a friend a postcard with a black-and-white photograph of a Cambodian peasant woman holding an infant.

She writes, “What struck me most was that this unposed photograph was instantly recognizable as a Madonna and child. The mother beholding the child, in love and wonder, the photograph spoke powerfully about Mary as a presence in our world, a constant reminder that in the incarnation the omnipotent God chose to take on human vulnerability” (foreword of *Blessed One,* p. ix).

What to make of her? A new book, *Beloved One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary,* is a collection of essays by Protestant theologians, every one of whom admits that Protestants have by and large ignored Mary and that only recently have we been willing to look again at the role she plays in the biblical story and the meaning her experience might have for our faith. About the only time Protestants even think about her is at Christmas when we drag her out reluctantly, place her in the middle of the crèche, and give her a role in the children’s pageant.

Nancy Duff, who teaches theology at Princeton Seminary, says that the problem is that nothing separates Protestants and Catholics like Mary. The seventh-century theologian and church father John of Damascus wrote, “The name Theotokos (Mother of God) expresses the whole mystery of God’s saving dispensation.” Catholics call her Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, and there is a current effort among some Catholics to make her co-redeemer, along with her son. Co-Redemptrix is the correct title, and to some Protestants, it sounds like the Holy Trinity is about to become the Holy Quartet. “Seventeen festival days are devoted to her and fifty Hail Mary’s are included in the Rosary. Catholics often address Mary in prayer and call upon her as intercessor” (p. 59).

In our time, Protestant theologian Karl Barth retorted, “In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Church which explains all the rest” (See Jason Byassee, *Christian Century,* 1 December 2004).

Catholic tradition has built a system of doctrine about Mary that perplexes Protestants because it is not in the Bible. But for Catholicism tradition, church declarations also have authority along with scripture.

And so in 1854 the Roman Catholic church added the doctrine of Immaculate Conception: Mary was conceived and born without sin and continued to be sinless in her earthly life. Mary’s virginity is also perpetual, and so the words “Jesus’ brothers and sisters” in our Bibles are translated “Jesus’ cousins” in Catholic Bibles.

In 1950 the Catholic church added the doctrine of Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven. The more Catholicism had to say about Mary, the more she

receded in Protestant consciousness, until she almost disappeared. Peter Gomes makes the point by telling the story of the prominent and prolific Protestant theologian who died and went to heaven. Jesus comes down from his seat at the right hand of God to greet him "Ah, Professor, what a pleasure. Welcome to the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says. "I know you have met my father, but I don't believe you know my mother."

In fact, about the only time Protestants pay attention at all to Mary, other than Christmas pageants, is when we are arguing about the virgin birth. During the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversies in the last century, a list of five fundamentals was drawn up by conservative evangelicals to define, once and for all, the Christian faith. If you subscribed to the fundamentals you were a Christian. If you did not subscribe, you weren't authentically Christian. The virgin birth was one of the fundamentals. It is really an argument about biblical authority. Is every word of the Bible literally true and thus necessary to believe for our salvation? Or is the point something other than the words themselves, which may or may not be literally, historically, geographically true? In the midst of that kind of argument, the virgin birth becomes a kind of litmus test of true faith, and at that point I always want to say that I think we're missing the whole point. The point here is not about biology or gynecology. It is not about Mary's sexual activity or abstention from it. It is about God and God's power to make a way where there is no way, to make the impossible become possible. The point is not Mary's virginity; it is that God chose her, a young, unmarried peasant girl to bear God's Son, the Savior of the world.

Mary and her story are invitations to bring more than our intellects, our objective, rational, analytical capacity to this unlikely story. She is an invitation to bring our love and our hope and our imagination. Imagination, after all, is an important part of knowing. We know not just with our brain, but with our hearts and emotions. We believe with more than our intellects. Mary is an invitation to bring our hearts, our love, to our faith.

Kathleen Norris, as you may remember, was away from the church and Christian faith for most of her life. Trying to be a writer, she began to spend time at a Benedictine monastery to deepen her own spirit. She was fascinated with the prayers, the beautiful chanting, the mystery. She says the little Protestant church of her childhood had scrubbed all the mystery and aesthetic beauty out of religion with a vinegary reason, and the monastery was, for her, the context for a real rebirth, a "meandering path through Monastery retreats back to membership in a Protestant church. Rediscovering Mary was no small part of that journey" (foreword of *Blessed One*).

It is time for Protestants to make a place for Mary. She is, after all, central to the whole story, the only biblical character to be there at the birth of Jesus and his death and every day in between.

We first meet her in the nativity story when the angel appears and announces that she will bear a son. She was already betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter by trade. Marriage was a two-step process in that day. We assume that Mary was quite young, a teenager. Joseph had asked her family for Mary's hand in marriage and had brought a suitable gift. Both families met with a rabbi and two witnesses and signed a contract of betrothal. Mary was, at that point, Joseph's legal wife although they were not yet married.

The custom was for the two families to take the prospective bride and groom back to their homes and to prepare for the official wedding, which might happen in a matter of months. Mary and Joseph are betrothed—not yet married—and it is at that point that Mary turns up pregnant.

Joseph, about whom we will think next week, is perplexed, to say the least. Crushed is probably more like it. His young fiancée is pregnant, and he's not the father. He's entitled to justice. She is his legal betrothed and she has broken the law. But he's a good man and decides against public vindication and punishment. He'll simply divorce her quietly. And then Joseph has a dream instructing him to trust this whole improbable process—and he does it, tells no one, takes Mary as his wife, marries her, and becomes the child's father.

The late Morton Kelsey imagines the gossip: "Most people are more comfortable with violence than unconventional sexual behavior and Mary's neighbors were no exception. The villagers could count and they talked about the impropriety of Mary's pregnancy. They smiled knowingly as Mary passed them to draw water from the village well. When the story of a heavenly visitor leaked out they snickered openly" (*The Drama of Christmas,* p. 20).

Author Reynolds Price imagines that Mary was the object of lifelong scorn because of her problem pregnancy. "Bastard, Bastard, Mary's Bastard boy! God's big baby!" he imagines her neighbors taunting her and her son.

Caesar Augustus's census interrupts the final stages of her pregnancy. Joseph is required to return to the seat of his ancestral home, the city of David, Bethlehem, to be counted in the census. It's a long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, ninety miles. It took a week traveling on foot and by donkey along winding mountain roads, and when they finally arrived, she had her baby, a son, in a the stable behind an inn, and she and Joseph wrapped him in the bands of cloth they brought with them and laid him in the manger.

There is nothing in the Bible about Jesus' childhood other than a single incident when his parents took him to Jerusalem for the Passover. But it was Mary who nursed, weaned, and fed him. It was Mary who bathed him and dressed him every day of his young life.

Martin Luther, always blunt and earthy, continued to appreciate Mary because, he said, keeping her in the story helps us to remember just how radical the doctrine of the incarnation—the enfleshment of God—is. "Mary," Luther said, "suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God."

It was Mary who sang to him and played with him and told him stories. It was Mary who taught him the songs of his people. Austin Seminary theology professor Cynthia Rigby sees hints of Mary's parenting in Jesus' life: the frugality he showed by picking up the leftover food at the feeding of the five thousand. Mary taught him that. Or the story of the leaven in the loaf: he had watched her baking bread every day. Or the woman searching for a lost coin: he had seen her do that (*Beloved One*).

Mary, Professor Rigby suggests, was an artist—bearing God.

She appears throughout the story and is there, faithfully, poignantly, at the end, watching as he dies on the cross. In many Renaissance paintings of the nativity, there is a small crucifix or cross somewhere as a reminder that Mary not only bore and nurtured him and daily parented him through adolescence and young adulthood; she did what no one wants to do or should have to do: watch her child die.

So let's make a place for her.

Let's allow her to remind us how grounded in life this faith of ours is. We're inclined, you and I are, to think about our faith in terms of ideas and propositions and truth claims. We're inclined to measure faith in terms of doctrinal statements and creeds and whether or not we can subscribe to them. And Mary reminds us that our faith is a response to a love that was expressed not in a carefully reasoned treatise but in a human life, in the everyday drama and passion of betrothal and marriage and pregnancy and birth and death.

And let Mary's special place and role be a reminder to us that God cares deeply about the human condition—that is to say, your condition and mine, whatever it may be. Let Mary remind us of the wideness of God's mercy.

God chose a modest, nondescript, peasant girl. God chooses to be with the modest and marginal, the poor and weak, the humble and forgotten. So let

Mary remind us that God can use modest men and women who don't seem to have much to commend them, not much that the world recognizes as important and powerful and influential, modest, humble, sometimes quite young, human beings, to do the most important work.

And let Mary remind us of perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of our faith: namely the profound compassion of God. The God of Western Christianity is all-powerful, omnipotent, omniscient, a God "in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." Our God can be a little intimidating actually, but for centuries, Mary has reminded the faithful that God is also infinite compassion and infinite love.
For centuries, Mary has reminded people whose needs were urgent and who needed something more than a well-reasoned theology—suffering people, oppressed people, sick people, dying people—Mary reminded them of an accessible side of God, a feminine side if you will, a maternal side, a God who comes to be with them.

Historians, chroniclers of every war ever fought—the Civil War, the Second World War—report that after the terrible fighting of the day has subsided and darkness falls on the battlefield, the voices of the fallen, the wounded and dying, mostly young men, are heard always in the darkness calling out of pain and fear and grief, calling for their mothers.

And so let Mary—who, at the end, held the lifeless body of her son in her arms—let Mary be a reminder to the mother whose son was killed in Iraq last week, the parents and brothers and sisters and children and wives and husbands who wait in fear and in hope, let her be a reminder of the mercy and compassion and nearness of God.

Let Mary, who bore him, nurtured him, and followed him to the end, be a reminder to each and every one of us, whatever it is we face in the days ahead, whatever fear or loss or anxiety or uncertainty, whatever joy or anticipation and eager love that lies ahead for us—let Mary, mother of Jesus, remind us of the love that came down at Christmas to be with us and to keep us every day of our lives.

Hail Mary . . . Blessed are you among us all. Amen.